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Misunderstood: The Innocence of War

Zovem se Ivana, I ja imam dvanaest godina; zivim u Sarajevu, Bosna . . .

My name is Ivana, and I am twelve years old. I live in Sarajevo, Bosnia. I have lived here my whole life. I took my first steps on the carpet my grandpa installed, and the pencil marks from my uncle's growth spurt in 1952 still line the walls of the apartment. The constantly bolted door has been the first new renovation made since my family bought the complex. I wish this place still felt like home, but it doesn't feel so familiar anymore. The rough brick on the outside of our apartment crumbles from remnants of homemade bombs, and I can't even look out the windows anymore where I used to press my nose up against the glass watching my mom come home with fresh bread from the Pekara. Everything changed about a year ago when our city went under siege. I knew things were different when blood on the lawn outside didn't only mean my brother scrapped his knee playing futbol. It's frustrating; I don't really understand why everything happened so quickly.

I do remember my aunt and uncle arguing with my parents just before the war started. They said Bosnia wasn't safe anymore, and they wanted my family to move with them to Austria. My parents tried to pack up some of my things that week; we were going on a putevanje, they said. I refused to help because I knew vacations did not mean packing canned food and blankets. I cried for days when I thought we were going to leave, and when I found out my aunt and uncle took grandpa with them. Those tears ran between every goodbye I had to say to all of my friends from school whose families chose to do what mine was so reluctant to; I cried enough to fill Vrelo Bosne, but my teachers taught me that was the source of life, not the death I felt all around me.

I could not imagine leaving my room; my father could not imagine leaving his country. But now, I wish we would have had more time to find a way out, or more time to swallow our pride. Because, by the time we applied for passports, the borders were closed. I don't even get to sleep in my room because my parents, grandma, and three brothers all have to live in the kitchen. The kitchen table makes a nice bunk bed, but I always wake up with bruises when it is my turn to sleep on the kitchen counter

top. My mom says it's dangerous to move to other parts of the apartment because of the windows. One morning, we woke up and saw our TV was broken; a bullet had come right through our window. My mom started to cry because that is usually where my oldest brother sleeps most nights. He came to sleep next to me this night. The thunder scared me, and I forgot my doll in my room. It thunders a lot; I can't sleep very well anymore because it is so loud.

Now that the TV is broken, we never know what is happening outside. I asked my dad why we don't just ask the neighbors if we can borrow their radio, but then he got very angry and started yelling at my mom about not being able to trust anyone anymore . . . "Pomozi mi Boze! Ne znam sta raditi . . ." I remember my father always being a giving and welcoming man. The front door to the apartment was always open, and the neighbors came over often to watch futbol games. I miss the smell of cevapi and cigarettes that used to paint the walls of the kitchen; that was so much more pleasant than the sight of dirty laundry rinsing in the sink. The last time I saw my friend Matea from next door was the first time I had ever seen my dad angry. He and Matea's father were arguing. Matea's tata shoved a Serbian crusted uniform in my dad's hands, but he refused to take it. When my dad turned his back, he was spat on; I accidentally put my hand in the spit when he wrapped me in his arms to carry me home.

I don't see my dad often anymore, just in the mornings when he leaves for work; my mom always wakes me up when she grabs her rosary and starts mumbling the Our Father . . . "Oce Nas, koj jesi na nebasima. . ." and I catch a glimpse of him putting his hand on the cold door knob. Some days, my parents ask me to go get water for everyone, and my mom whispers the same prayer in my ear. She insists that I repeat it to myself until I get back to the apartment. It is a very long line that I have to stand in. I left the apartment very early in the morning to do just this today. Even before the sun was up, I could see 50 children like me fidgeting in line already.

Slowly, as the hours pass by, I move closer to getting my bucket filled. I started hearing the same thunder as the night our TV got broken not too long ago. The pants of the little boy in front of me are wet,

but I can't feel any rain drops. A storm must be coming. The thunder is quickly growing louder and closer as the sun rises; I am about two places in line from getting water now, and I can see dark smoke clouds coming from the mountains. I hear some of the biggest strikes yet. They startle me so much that I remember to keep praying . . . Sveti se ime tvoje dodi kraljestvo tvoje. . . The bumps I get from others in line make me look up and realize the water tank has burst open and water is spilling everywhere. Before I bend down to save a few drops, I stop. I can't figure out why the water is running red from the well.

-Alyssa Brown
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